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## Brainstorming ideas for projects

Behance and 99 Percent founder Scott Belsky spent years researching how creative leaders at Google, Disney, Zappos, and other firms turned brainstorming into completed projects. This excerpt from Making Ideas Happen suggests ways of tackling urgent matters without sacrificing long-term goals. As leaders of creative projects, we feel an impulse to solve everything quickly. I call this "Creator's Immediacy"—an instinct to take care of every problem and operational task, no matter how large or small, as soon as it comes up, similar to a mother's instinct for the care of a newborn baby. However, it becomes nearly impossible to pursue long-term goals when you are guided solely by the most recent e-mail in your in-box or call from a client. Fortunately, there are ways to manage the urgent stuff without compromising progress on long-term projects. The capacity to do so starts with compartmentalization, shared values, and the power of clarity. Here are some tips to consider: Keep two lists When it comes to organizing your Action Steps of the day—and how your energy will be allocated—create two lists: one for urgent items and another for important ones. Long-term goals and priorities deserve a list of their own and should not compete against the urgent items that can easily consume your day. Once you have two lists, you can preserve different periods of time to focus on each. G/O Media may get a commission. Choose five projects that matter most Recognize that compromise is a necessity. Some people narrow their list of important items to just five specific things. Family is often one of the five, along with a few other specific projects or passions that require everyday attention. The most important aspect of this list is what's not on it. When urgent matters come up, the "important" stuff you are working on that didn't make your list should be dropped. You may be surprised to see how much energy you spend on off-list items! Don't hoard urgent items Even when you delegate operational responsibilities to someone else, you may still find yourself hoarding urgent items as they arise. When you care so deeply about a project, you likely prefer to resolve things yourself. Say an e-mail arrives from a client with a routine problem. Even though the responsibility may lie with someone else on your team, you might think, "Oh, this is really a quick fix; I'll just take care of it." And gradually your energy will start to shift away from long-term pursuits. Hoarding urgent items is one of the most damaging tendencies I've noticed in creative professionals that have encountered early success. When you are in the position to do so, challenge yourself to delegate urgent items to others. Create a Responsibility Grid If you have a partner, you'll want to divide and conquer various tasks for efficiency. Some teams create a "Responsibility Grid" to help them compartmentalize. This is also a tool that I used with co-heads of teams while working at Goldman Sachs. Across the top of the chart (the horizontal x-axis) you write the names of the people on the team. Then, down the left side of the page (the vertical y-axis), you write all of the common issues that come up in a typical week. Place a check in the grid for which team member (listed along the top) is responsible for which type of issue (along the side). For example, if you're a small application development team, your list of issues might include "inquiry for a sale or team discount," "bug report from a user," "report of lost data," and "suggestion for a new feature." As a team, you go through each person's column and check the issues he or she is responsible for. Once completed and agreed upon, this chart sends an important message about who is (and, more important, who is not) allowed to respond to certain issues. The exercise in itself will help quench everyone's impulse to do everything themselves and will streamline your team's operations. Click image for a larger view. Create windows of non-stimulation To achieve long-term goals in the age of always-on technology and free-flowing communication, create windows of time dedicated to uninterrupted project focus. Merlin Mann, founder of the productivity Web site 43 Folders, has called for the need to "make time to make." It is no surprise that Mann is also known for begging people not to e-mail him (in fact, he refuses to answer any suggestions or requests via e-mail). After years of writing about productivity and life hacks, Mann realized that the level of interruption increases in direct proportion to one's level of availability. Many people I have interviewed preserve blocks of time during their day—often late nights and early mornings—as precious opportunities to make progress on important items with little risk of urgent matters popping up. Of course, this practice requires great discipline and the ability to extract yourself from "reactionary workflow"—the state of always responding to what comes in to us. However, through windows of nonstimulation, you will reclaim the power to focus on what you believe is most important. We've previously grabbed some knowledge from Belsky's Behance before, including decorating a wall with done items and re-energizing projects with a good fight. His new book, Making Ideas Happen: Overcoming the Obstacles Between Vision & Reality, is now out in hardcover. BRAINSTORM. It's such an aggro word, isn't it? We're gonna STORM SOME BRAINS WITH IDEAS. Unfortunately, new research has found that brainstorming may be the ideating equivalent of a mild drizzle. So Co.Design writers Diana Budds and Mark Wilson brainstorm, err, discuss a few alternatives that might work better. 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